I descended to the banks of Mother Shyok. The path down was rugged and hard-going, with little to recommend it. As I went further, I passed the dismal jacals of the indigenes, which were themselves eclipsed by the loft eyries of the limitanei.

It had been the time for fasting and abstinence, with only unseasoned porridge for sustenance. Practice had been observed strictly by all, excepting the usual burghers. Now, however, had begun the holy season of rejoining. The high tensions, almost strictly inevitable after such austerity, were displaced by high spirits — excepting, of course, the usual burghers, whose sour mood was fixed by their ambitions and superiors.

I decided to rest when I reached the valley. Shyok was energetic, and her cool waters stripped the mineral dross from my feet. A voice called out for me not to leave; I had made no motion to do so. It was Judoc, the former *cancellarius* of Ladakh. He handed me a warm cup of tea, whose bitterness had been tempered by rich butter. I told him how very glad I was to see him, and how fortunate it was that his was the first voice I had recognized today. He returned my courtesy, with some addition.

"Sten, you absolutely must come with us to tonight's opera. The archon spared no expense for its preparation. I know that he brought in the foremost troupe from the Valley of Flowers; the women are devilishly beautiful and the men as lithe as panthers." My senses had been starved of much color and noise, and I told him so.

"Besides, it's my last season in town. I'll be leaving as soon as there's ice in Shyok." I asked him why he planned to leave so shortly after his retirement, but he brushed my question aside and badgered me for my assent, which I had never withheld.

We made for a yogurt stall. No payment was required. As the sun fell, the unmistakable toll of brass clashing against brass was heard from the plaza, calling us to our seats. I sat next to a grim youth, whose brilliant habit was overtaken by russet stains. Judoc thrust his arm over my chest and shook the boy's hand eagerly. I caught nothing of what he said, though I correctly assumed it was an invitation. The youth nodded slowly without lifting his hood. Whispering to me, Judoc confessed that the man was our carnifex, and that he was out of work during the jubilee. I had no objections to his company, I replied truthfully. Judoc flashed a nervous smile nonetheless.

The show was rich and vibrant, as promised. The masked women were gowned in bright silk of changing shapes, and the acrobats spirited. I stepped away during the morality play, searching for our local delicacy of fried cheese and sugar. The message of the play was Manichean, a doctrine that I understood well but outgrew in youth. As I returned, the opera neared its end. Judoc and I walked to his *Ansitz*, the carnifex following a few paces behind. It was almost compline when we reached the house.

The cataphract Philotimos was pacing under the pergola, dimly lit by torches. I had last seen him on campaign in Siachen decades ago, joining battles with thin air and disabling incandescence. His cropped hair was now quicksilver, and his damask skin had fractured further. He was one of the *clibinarii*, and we both remembered well how his heavy armor — so useful against the mountain cold — effectively seared him by the snow's reflection. Repeated encounters with the violet array had not been kind to him.

I took fast strides to say hello. His posture straightened upon greeting us. He had perfected the art of bearing martial airs, despite how much retirement atrophied the practice. I nearly believed his self-assuredness.

We three were led into the perfumed atrium, which carried an ornate cupola above. The carnifex and I both paused to stare upwards at the illustration, lit by some unknown source. The scene was pastoral, scarred by an act of divine violence. It imparted a chill unease. I turned away. The young man looked up

rapturously, unblinking. Philotimos either did not see it, owing to pains in his neck, or else had seen it before. He and Judoc were speaking of mundane affairs as I rejoined them. The house eunuchs ushered us guests into the *andron* and served a strong barleywine. Judoc returned shortly in a fine samite gown. The four of us drank slowly in relative calm for a watch, although the carnifex drank with noted urgency. He had again pulled his hood down after it fell in the atrium.

"Well, my friends, it wouldn't do for us to revel like mute symposiasts. As I am your host, I order you to set a theme for tonight's conversation!" It was plain that Judoc spoke out of kinship, but plainer still that he spoke as one accustomed to having his orders followed. Perhaps it was this natural authority that compelled Philotimos' reply. I myself had grown unused to wakefulness at this hour; the young man had fixed his gaze on some new fresco-secco.

"You aged lech! We all" — he paused to appraise the carnifex — "know well what satisfies you. Catamites!" Philotimos issued a low chuckle after his own comment. Judoc looked down and tugged at his robe, pinching and rolling the fabric. He laughed along.

"You have lived a life in search of beauty. Beauty has found me in unexpected places. I am curious to hear what Stentor over there thinks, since he is seen outside his cell on the cliff scarcely these days. And… you there, boy, I have yet to hear your name." Judoc answered for the carnifex: "Algedonus, he's our town butcher."

Philotimos raised an eyebrow, inspecting the lad. "Rather green, and rather scrawny, for the post." Algedonus, his eyes scarcely visible from under his hood, replied that his master had recently perished by an unexpected attack of apoplexy. As such, he was still an apprentice at the time of his elevation. His voice was a reedy miasma, nervous and overfull of breath.

"But he's done an impeccable job since!" Judoc wiped his palms onto his thighs, and I wondered at the source of his feverishness. Philotimos frowned.

"My point being, I offer tonight's theme as to the source of beauty. Whom do we owe for beauty? I harbor mine own answer in truth, though I desire to hear your attempts." I told him that I should like a moment to think on the matter first, and Algedonus wordlessly agreed.

After a spell, Judoc raised his hands in exaggerated defeat. "I can stomach this fierce silence no longer! Philo, you already have your answer — why don't you lead the chorus? I'll follow next, either dissenting or not." Philotimos shrugged, his shoulders almost boxing his ears. I guessed at the reason why and smiled to myself.

"Fine, so be it. I put forth that we owe to the goddess of war our debts for beauty." Evidently, he expected a reaction that he did not receive. He rubbed the nape of his neck, sloughing ashy derma.

"Hm. I was recently engaged abroad. You might have read on it." Judoc nodded; I shook my head. "Of the published accounts, I found that there were four kinds: those from the soldiers, those from the generals, those from the reporters, and those from the theorists. The latter category was especially dishonest, since they omitted the facts that did not suit their prejudice. Public opinion — and you," glancing at Judoc, "should correct me if false — has disfavored the former two, as we are thought unskilled in literary affairs. That much is correct. But for the inquirer after truth, these two accounts are the only that matter.

"Look on the patterns of creation. Man has never rested from our eternal conflicts: with our kin; our foes; the manifest of nature, including Nature herself; and Time, the last enemy that shall be destroyed. I heard scripture from a Moravian fellow, who taught that man had never banded together until brothers united in revolt against their tyrant patriarch. I do not doubt him. As we know, the firstborn then killed the

younger for his finer oblations. But even when blood was undivided, man's struggle to survive was already known. The farmer battles the soil and seasons, the hunter his game, the woman her faithlessness. All is set unending in motion opposed.

"Let me now return to the lay theorists and reporters. You have heard, from them, that our latest crusade has been the most inhumane in the record. You have heard, from them, the rarest macabre: the slaughters; the lunatic advances and fey retreats; the plagues; the overtaxed medics, so few in our rank; the chaos inflicted by witless *strategoi*; the captives, stripped bare and paraded for our morale. You have heard, from them, on the failures of the crown and the boule, who sent us into battle under counterfeit pretenses: imagined crimes of the enemy, committed with dreamed-up weaponry. You have heard, from them, the inescapable deduction that our leaders are either manipulative or manipulated, if not both.

"All of what they say is true."

Philotimos paused to drink and to wipe sweat from his brow. The room had been filled with his powerful baritone, which amplified as he spoke. I found discomfort in the onset quiet and wondered if Judoc commanded our speeches from a similar disease. I drank also and prepared myself to attend.

"Are you surprised to hear it? Each single theorist omits the facts that trouble the theory but, gathered as a whole, the facts are the case. Each reporter writes events through the color of their quartz but, divorced from the seer, the events betided. If a people should enter the madness of war, they must have madmen in charge.

"Shall I say where they erred? I trust that you, Stentor, understand already." I said nothing, and continued to look at him. "Read the accounts of the soldiery. Will you see in them a record of these horrors, their outrage at these atrocities? You will not. Why? Because they did not occur, because the outrage was not present? No, such men are too simple to deceive others. To lie, certainly — but not to deceive."

I privately decided that I disliked this rhetorical form of address, which was often a prelude to the hortatory.

"The soldier did not report the grim detail of conflict because it was unfamiliar, but because it was too familiar. The veteran knew the risks of battle, knew that suffering was endemic, and fought anyway. The recruit concerned himself with survival, either learning from the veteran or perishing.

"Why, then, record such detail? Did men not fall in battle in ages past? Does plague not exist within the city walls? Are leaders shielded from incompetence in civil affairs?" He looked as though he wanted to except Judoc, but did not. "I tell you now, my friends: everywhere and always, men and women are engaged in the struggle perpetual. If there is rest, it shall not greet us in this life!"

Philotimos stood up and spilled his drink on the *kline*. "Fight! Be no longer in ignorance of battle, but fight with fullness of heart and fire of spirit! There is no aid for you; the mettle must flow from your reserves alone. The infant, despite all the spurs of the mother, must claw for air! The child, weak of leg and lacking grace, must fight the pull of the world to stand! Stand now and fight!"

The attending eunuch brought him ardent spirits, for which he seemed grateful. I wondered if he had rehearsed this oration, or else had given it to his charges before a skirmish. The company, still reclining, raised our glasses in praise as Philotimos resumed his seat.

Algedonus began to clap, vigorously and alone.

"That was a fine speech, good sir, a most excellent speech!" His voice was a bitter wind during a June sext. Algedonus slowed his clapping before ceasing altogether.

"I did, however, notice an omission." Philotimos' face darkened. "A small one, good sir, a very small one. Did you not task yourself with exalting the source of beauty? I'm afraid that the matter might have escaped your notice." Although Philotimos shifted to look toward him, Algedonus did not break his rictal gaze.

"You will find, perhaps, that you can better hear should you lower your hood, whelp." Meanwhile, Judoc rubbed his palms together, sudorific. "Did I not say at the outset that I pay my tribute to the goddess of war?"

Algedonus nodded. "You did, sir, of course you did! But in your words, I heard only of war itself, not of the goddess, sir. Who is this goddess, and whom does she favor? Exactly where, sir, is the beauty in her bounty?"

"I have said my piece, and wish now to drink and hear the views of my friends." He placed great emphasis on the final word, which did not escape notice. For a few heartbeats, silence reigned.

"Fine. I name the triune Grey One — the Sister of War: the single-eyed swan called Bellona. She favors the maimed and wounded, but only those who return clothed in glory. She condescends to bless the general outside the city gates, before his triumph. I was blessed so." He looked down at his cracked skin, with exposed hypoderm, and clicked his tongue. "She offered no succor. She holds the scales of war — that is to say, life — exactly and without bias.

"What of her beauty? It is the beauty of seeing things aright, escaping the ignorance that pretends to excuse us from the fray. It is the beauty of diminishing self, of winning honor, and of scenting the laurel crown upon return. It is the beauty of life draining from the fallen and coursing, as ichor, into you. Have you now had your fill of questions answered, butcher?"

Algedonus' laugh suggested a hyena's all too easily. In reflection, I realize that it was more like a hyena drowning. "Butcher? My good sir, I should think you feel more kinship with me than that! Are we not butchers both?"

Philotimos' glare carried his dissent.

"No matter. Your beauty is that from a crone! Ah, I think your mouth is too full of victory to speak intelligently of beauty." Despite lacking sympathy for the carnifex, I made motion to restrain Philotimos. He relented, thankfully; I was not certain I could shout him down. Judoc's nervous gnashing was visible, if not audible, yet he remained reclined.

"Come to think of it, good sir, your crone is a touch whorish, no? She shares her favor with man and beast alike! Perhaps the **hmkl** endowment of her admirers is less than satisfactory…?" This time, I would not deny satisfaction; to my surprise, it was not sought.

"I have been privileged to break bread with the vanquished more usually than the victorious. I am no fledgling initiate into the rites of the beautiful. And, since I have the wit to attend to the topic at hand, I will name my patrons from the start:

"The progeny of Matriarch Night! I pay tribute to them all. During the practice of my art, I become the Unturnable One, severing strands sent by my sisters. My attendants, the winged Keres, lusting maggot-like after your leavings. In the eyes of my clients, I don the mantle of punctual Moros. You may cast me as Momos — perhaps you misheard," staring now at Philotimos, "— and I will inhabit the role, as I have tonight. But know that I have been sent like Nemesis to pierce through your falsities of self-love and righteousness. And I never fail to pay my brother, the ferryman.

"Yet, if I might spare offense to these patrons and those unnamed, I would source beauty most of all in graceful Oizus: my dear twin (at least for tonight), who is sainted by poets and prisoners alike. I am no zealous lover of fabulists and lyricists, though I admire the verse that relates

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear—

How oft I have seen this gift! The old grizzly spoke of blood divided and ichor coursing. But what of blood conspiring and ichor congealed? What consolation does your beloved hag offer then? And yet, we do not deny that despair delights, nor that misery mitigates man's misfortunes!"

The speech so far was dull, and I found myself missing the martial oratory of Philotimos. At least he refrained from alliteration, so taxing to the ear. I took the ardent spirits offered and hoped that my conduct would not suffer much from it.

While Algedonus was rapt by one of his flourishes, Luguvalos entered the *andron*. He stumbled in, looking disheveled and bearing a tidy stack of papyri, issuing apologies to the crowd. It was plain he heard some of Algedonus' eerie address and did not wish to disrupt. I was glad for his intrusion, as Philotimos evidently was also. We traded niceties as Luguvalos was offered drink and a seat. He set his bordereau in Judoc's study and reclined.

Unquestionably incensed by this impedance to his overture, Algedonus silently crept out of the house in the meantime. Judoc, who might have been pleased, was further discomposed.

For all his virtues, Judoc was not a natural host. Though he was generous, he worried overmuch about social balance and factoring variables. Judoc was a nervous man in mundane matters, yet icy in dire business. He is, perhaps, among the most impenetrable men I have known, and this for the simple reason that he was a spectre pretending to mass.

He was barred from sleep by nightmares and inclined to drink. But the drink, instead of quelling the ill dreams, promoted them. Visits to his home during matins revealed him staggering down his halls, screaming the appropriate versicles — 'Deliver me, O Creator, from the waters that have drowned my spirit' — and *Kyrie eleison*, weeping. Such scenes were not strictly performative, but neither did they seem religious acts of catharsis and ablution. He arranged himself to be a featureless servant, clad in subfusc, yet he was not a bureaucratic soul. I hoped for him to find the clarity of ataraxia in retirement.

"Well, Lugu, Philo set tonight's theme in praise of beauty and its source." Judoc gestured to the yawning cataphract, who had shrugged off tonight's hooks and crosses. I knew that Philotimos possessed a kind of nobility that would not spur him to seek revenge on the carnifex; he believed that all such men were either remolded or else undone by their flaws.

"He spoke well and, though I myself am disposed to the coward's life, tricked my passions into rising bloodlust!" Judoc collected himself. "You shan't speak if you're opposed to the idea. I had awaited Sten's account, even if he mightn't be able to share it!"

I raised my hand in assurance, at once realizing how drunk I had become and curious as to how befuddled I appeared to others. It is a devilish quality of drink that one feels one's mind pouring forth half-realized bits of wisdom, emboldened by confidences, yet finds one's mouth inutile for simple conversation. Luguvalos laughed as my lolling head swiveled.

"Like Philo, I recently went abroad. I left my consorts in their natal homes and travelled upwards along the rocky banks of Shyok. (Contrary to her name, I found an absolute source of life in her waters.) I rested in the Valley of Flowers — among other matters, I was sourcing the archon's troupe for our opera. You'll know that, due to the cold, little nourishment is found up there. I drank juice pressed out of the bletted berries of buckthorn, sweet and oily, which had a purgative effect on me. Since there were no alternatives, I subsisted on the juice entirely: shitting and sweating into a delirium. The added rosemary, I'm sure, only intensified the effects.

"The yellow-hats at the Diskit Gompa housed me during this time. Most of them were bright-eyed young scholars, absorbed in their tantric studies. Kind, to be clear, but the kindness of those dispossessed who have found refuge in the life of the mind. The elders, however, already held their *geshe* and did not trouble themselves with the riddles of epistemology, except in the course of their instructing the students.

"Isn't that so childlike? One fixes their gaze singlemindedly on an object of desire — well, not *really* desire in their case, haha — and finds only disinterest when it's attained!" He laughed and cleared his throat. "Their duties were chiefly of maintenance and destruction. I confess, I found the two tasks terribly at odds.

"Maintenance, of course, was of the monastery and especially that vast idol of a crowned messiah on whom they wait. Our recognition of the Theanthropos has lifted that kind of burden from us, although we do expect his return. Well, *I* don't, at least: as Philo said, I can't expect 'it shall greet us in this life!'."

Judoc was exceptionally skilled at imitation and, though he was the first to laugh at his jests, it was often natural for us to follow suit. "Maintenance also in their sandpainting, which was continually frustrated by the high mountain winds. But then again, on the other hand, destruction!

"You might know that they craft these, hm, illustrations from colored sand called *mandalani*. The elders are doubled over a low table, like rheumatics, tap-tap-tapping on these bronze shuttles. The designs, if you've never seen them, frustrate judgment with their intricacies. I was fortunate to see one completed, in attendance with the bald-headed children. And when they finished, the chief elder cut across the design in the eight cardinal directions as I looked on in horror! How vibrant and consuming a thing to be utterly discarded! Since I was warmly received, I held my tongue.

"The other elders brushed the polychrome sand into a mixed heap, and returned it all to a nearby vessel. At the time, I thought the moral behind the practice was … a sort of mission for us to fix the impermanence of beautiful things in our mind's eye, and thus to preserve them through our attention. I have still not forgotten that picture.

"I then proceeded to the fertile valley of Skardu. I was on a … well, I think I might confide in you." Judoc scanned the room, meeting our expectant gazes. "The archon had sent me on a diplomatic errand to broker peace with the Pashtun."

Philotimos soured; Judoc was helplessly aware of his offense. "You know they're a troublesome and militaristic people, and I confess it would be easier to let our fairweather Punjabi friends hash it out. But … they're an infliction for reasons separate." His voice trailed off, and he again cleared his throat. "Anyways.

"It'd take the decades of a saros to relate fully the delights of that Arcadia. Even their martial bases look like places of worship. I admit my surprise that they can remain so discontent in such a place. But again, irrelevant. Believe it or not, this little encomium has a point! So, I'll instead pass over Skardu in silence. Their terraforming and architecture are quite marvelous, however, should you wish to visit."

He eyed Philotimos in distress, though the soldier did not appear to be stomaching resentment. With the young carnifex away, the gathering was strictly among friends — more or less. Luguvalos, with some inscrutable intensity, motioned for me to drink. I waved my hand and pointed at my tea.

"I arrived in the capital city of Kolachi. Once more, the wonders I saw there are too numerous for this account, so I must again remain silent. Uncertain of its apposition, I'll yet note this curious difference: when I was fostered by the yellow-hats, it seemed to be that my care was the performance of some duty. I'll not pretend to know their mysteries, so I can't strictly affirm this suspicion. But I wasn't treated like an individual; perhaps it was a sort of pity? Rather than duty, I mean. Not that the two conflict necessarily.

"Yet in Kolachi, my hosts treated me with warmth and familial tenderness. I was invited to their rituals, an invitation I accepted not only because of my office, but also out of curiosity and mutual respect. The rituals of the gonpa, however, were shrouded by austerity. And, though the monks drank and the Pashtun could not, how dreadfully sober were the former!" He frowned. "I do like the yellow-hats, you should know.

"The citizenry of Kolachi defy census and thus taxation. The local noise, then, is beyond imagining. At the Empress Bazaar, where regulation has been abandoned, one hears tinny strings plucked in all corners; the auctioneer's shouts and balladeer's tune indistinguishable; the pulse of stamping treads and tabla resonating within one's chest; poultry squawks and cattle braying. The smell! I tell you, it's beyond your ken. The city's aroma is attended always by the smell of bitumen and livestock, but I most remember the clouds of hashish as well as the acid spit of *naswar* and coca leaves.

"It was among these sounds and smells that I came across a pannifex's stall. He wove *kilimleri* for the *salat*. One of them in particular rooted me in place: I saw that it bore the same pattern I strove to fix in my mind, the mandala's. As I looked, the bazaar-goers jostled me and spit at my feet. I paid no mind to them, nor could I. Each distinct object of the senses lost its definition as all blended into one.

"I felt as if I began to rise far above the city, connected to my body only by a slim, silver thread. In the byways and mains of Kolachi, I saw the warp and weft of the rug. Soon after, I looked upwards. The orbits of all the spheres began to hum as one and, when I returned to myself, the buzzing didn't cease. It still hasn't, though it abates and retires. Now grounded, I threw back my head and laughed at the perfection of all.

"My mission was complete (though time'll tell its success), and I returned to the yellow-hats. I saw Jetsun Dolma there, and I realized that I'd looked at her in my prior visit. This time, she looked at me. Her expression was … sibylline.

"At once, I beheld some mixture of pity and compassion. But as I stared, her serenity dropped and its place was taken by a condescension that turned into anger. I shifted to my right; her anger didn't follow me. I think it was directed at the asuras in the world, but even they weren't exempt from her pity. A monk stepped out from behind me and handed me a nenuphar."

Judoc placed his baculus before him and showed us the affixed flower, which had withered. "In that moment, I understood the duality behind the sandpainters' equanimity: as Lao Dan spake, 'to arrange is to destroy.'

"This life has been spent in arranging so far, and now I'll seek a life contemplative among the trees. I might venture far north among the Ambiani — my blood's place of origin, according to familial lore. But I'll never cease my continual best wishes for you all." He raised his glass in cheer, and we all cheered noisily with him and drank.

Questions came for him from all present, betraying everyone's curiosity. Though I think Luguvalos had some intimation of Judoc's plans before tonight, he did not refrain from asking Judoc about the finer details of his future travels. Yet despite my loving Judoc no less than anyone present (or indeed because of that fact), I examined him — finding myself in the role of the neglected carnifex.

"Judoc, my dear friend. Trust that I am no Inquisitor, and in your knowledge that I might be said to hold some heterodox beliefs. Would you thus mind if I asked you a few questions, in the privacy only to be found among friends?" He assented readily.

"You said earlier, quoting the Old Master, that 'to arrange is to destroy.' By this, do you mean to say that 'order is chaos,' or that each of those might be said to spring from the other?" He agreed to my latter interpretation.

"Do you aver that creation is subject to certain immutable laws, such as the pull of the worlds?" He did.

"Indeed, it would take great boldness to disagree with the natural scholars, who assert that we are no more than a colony of cells. Do you possess such boldness?" He did not, though he stated that he was not surefooted in his agreement with them; rather, he was inclined towards skepticism about matters of metaphysics, not outright disbelief. As he alluded earlier in his speech, he had abandoned his religious inclinations and expectations of the Theanthropos' return in youth.

"So, when you spoke earlier of asuras, you were speaking in metaphor of persons with transient lives, who lust after power?" He nodded.

"Do you believe that persons are in possession of reason?" He qualified: "Not all persons, perhaps!" and laughed.

"And do you believe anything else possesses reason?" After thinking for a spell, he disagreed.

"Whence, then, did our reason come?" He thought and then answered that it was from those immutable laws of nature.

"These laws that do not themselves possess reason?" He cottoned onto the puzzle quickly.

"Now, were these laws created by humans or discovered?" He affirmed the latter.

"Discovered, that is, by the exercise of reason?" He agreed.

"And in our exercise of reason, we employ numerical figures to represent these laws, such as the perfect annulus?" He nodded.

"Do we find such figures in nature?" He shook his head.

"So, since these figures are strictly proper to reason and we do not find representations of them in nature, they exist only in the human mind?" He nodded.

"Yet these figures are not irrelevant to the workings of matter, since they are employed in the natural laws, correct?" He nodded again.

"Therefore, since these laws were not created by humans, but instead were discovered by the use of reason, it follows that the universe was designed by an intelligence that is not human."

He disagreed. "I see nothing wrong with the thesis that reason arose spontaneously, thus enabling us to discover the laws of nature by accident. What say you to that, Sten?"

"Judoc, my friend, did reason arise spontaneously or did it arise in accordance with the laws?" He frowned. "If it arose spontaneously, then it would either betray a fundamental chaos of the universe or else it would be likened to epiphany." I could see he disliked where this dialogue was leading.

"But each law binds a cause to an effect. Or is that not the definition of a law?" He nodded, reluctantly. "So, which of the two options do you find most agreeable to your reason?"

"I believe that the universe is fundamentally chaotic, Sten." I steeled myself for what was to come, again drinking the barleywine. Luguvalos, unerringly perceptive, snickered and was gratified.

"I am afraid that I do not understand your position, Judoc. Earlier, you said that chaos came from order, and that order came from chaos. Do you still believe so?" He nodded.

"Then it would be appropriate to say rather that the universe is fundamentally chaotic *and* in order, no?" He nodded again.

"And to be in order is for creation to be subject to laws, in accordance with our definition of cause and effect? Or is there some other definition of order?" He shook his head: "None that I believe relevant."

"Therefore, it follows that there exists some first cause, prior to creation, that set this order in motion."

He disagreed, and supposed that it might instead be possible that the universe housed an infinite series of causes. I drank.

"It might. But I believe we have good reason to doubt that. In order for an infinite series to occur as you describe, it must take place in time, correct?" He nodded.

"And time is either itself infinite or else finite. Or is there a third possibility?" He shook his head while I drank. As I had halted my drinking of ardent spirits long before, I found that the barleywine was pleasant and amenable to the free outpouring of dialogue. But I also feared making an ass of myself to some unknown party, such as the one who might come across this account in 'dread sobriety.'

"Supposing time is infinite. The physical scholars claim that they are in possession of empirical findings that suggest against this supposition, that the universe did in fact have a beginning. They point to the motion our galaxies make, causing them to drift further apart, and to their fulfilled predictions that, if the universe did have its origin in a highly condensed state, we should be able to detect faint traces of the primordial photons that were not ensnared by the particles of primordial gas. I confess, of course, that I am no physical scholar myself, though I suspect that anyone inclined to a material perspective would find themselves attracted to this theory or else one like it.

"You might not like this argument, Judoc, but I offer it for any person so minded present: If time is infinite, then time stretches infinitely backwards. In this infinite duration of time before our own, every conceivable creature must have found their existence. Now, of course, it is surely conceivable that we should not be the only beings graced with reason, but note that I am not here arguing for the existence of Ahura Mazda — or El Shaddai, as you like — and the vile counterimage. Instead, I am speaking of the prior existence of the *yazatas* and their counterparts. I personally find it highly unlikely that creation could house angelic servants of the Pantocrator, yet preclude the Pantocrator itself. Other similar arguments, while different in content and form, might be offered for those other systems outside strict materialism.

"Now suppose time is finite. A finite duration of time might house an infinite series of changes, but only if the time between them is infinitesimal. But I find this supposition highly repulsive to reason, as we know all too well that changes occur within durations of time that are *not* infinitely small. *The child is the father of*

the man, but the child's birth was not instant. Consider, as an example, how long it took you to leave our great valley!" I sipped my beer, enclosed by silence.

"I should restate that I do not believe myself to have entirely discounted your suggested infinite series of causes, but I am reasonably confident that other, better minds might offer more powerful arguments in opposition. Even ill-equipped as I am, I think my attempt not wholly shameful." Luguvalos, whether in irony or sincerity, applauded softly.

"Thus, let us assume that there exists some initial being that caused creation to be set in motion. Now, per our initial premises, this being is that which designed the reason-abiding laws of creation. Thus it is so that, through the free and proper exercise of our reason, it is this being with whom we are in communication. One might picture this being as a draftsman, as an architect, a craftsman, or a maker of clocks. All such names have been applied throughout history.

"Although you did not specify it in your speech, I assume that you sourced beauty in the design of creation — the universe might properly be called creation, now — which you found represented in the microcosms and macrocosms of repeated patterns. Am I correct?" Judoc agreed.

"It is therefore beautiful because it appeals perfectly to your reason, and is the grandest such object that could do so?" He nodded.

"I disagree with you, my friend. Respectfully, of course. I do not deny that such a design is rational, nor that it is indeed quite beautiful. Consider how perfectly this design must have been executed for our subsistence: if certain cosmic variables had been altered by just a hair, life would be impossible. But I think this design, in all its grandeur, has a fatal flaw: everything within is vulnerable to eventual decay.

"Some say that the Pantocrator is a clockmaker, and worship him for the brilliance of his craftsmanship. We know that all clocks cease function when the owner dies. Why is this so?" Only puzzled, yet patient, looks were offered.

"The answer is quite simple: no one remains to refill the clock with water. If I am still charged by you, my friends, to speak on the source of beauty, I would say that beauty is found in this, the refilling of the water.

"An eidolon, a long-dead man who called himself a Stagiran, came to me in a dream and told me that '*all things are brought to ruin by time, which covers all in oblivion through its power*.' Yet, even drugged by sleep as I was, I knew that not all things are subject to this ruin.

"I find faith in the power that causes the dead to rise in health, whose pattern might be found in lesser degrees throughout nature: resistance to the slaying frost in things that grow, who then rise anew in spring; the scarabs, who mirror the sun's passage with models of dung; the host of small things that inherit life from corpses (we *omophagoi* among them); the crocodile, who restores his tail unmourning; in sum, I find beauty from the palingenesis that courts the loath conflagrations."

Luguvalos rolled his eyes. I could tell he had been drinking heavily since his arrival.

"You mean to tell us, *Stentoriskos*, that you find beauty in the resistance of the will." I shook my head, and explained that I did not think will very significant in the search after beauty — excepting, of course, the will of the Almighty.

"What a shame, I almost agreed with you… for once." His tone was musical always, though not quite theatrical. His green eyes shone more brightly than any lady's, his voice protected from soft womanishness

only by its depth. "In the course of my work, I have had the pleasure of company with many important men. *That*, as Judoc prodded me to relate earlier, is where *I* source beauty.

"You speak of entropy and disarray, and find beautiful that which defies it. Do you not realize that you speak of *will*? What is the monarch but a man who dreamed himself one? What is his state but that dream forced upon reality? We sit upon the earth of such men, and converse with one another *only because they permit it*. What of the world, who still bears like ripples in a lake the *wounds* inflicted by such men: the reforming priest, the military hero," he pointed at Philotimos, who almost blushed and seemed to be made uncomfortable, "the brilliant scholars, the poets and prophets? They deliver beauty that suits everyone here: *they* offer the glories of war, *they* shoulder the designs of creation and new ones also, *they* are serve as paragons of those who reverse the inevitable. What did that lunatic executioner say about beauty, something about death and melancholy? Well, *they* supply death and *they* transform melancholy into lyrics remembered eternally.

"Is not the Theanthropos the just bringer of fiery sword, the messenger of creation, the psalmist unrivalled, and the slayer of death itself? Is He not simply the greatest of great men who ever lived, died, then lived again? Oh, *permit me to guess*," he did a false bow in my direction, "you continue your dissent." I nodded, smiling slightly.

"Well, how about a change of pace, then? Will you *allow* that, for once, *you* might be the one questioned? What is your response?" I said I could refuse him nothing. Luguvalos was a changed man since he took up his itinerant hagiography, but he had not changed so much since the sweet days of our shared youth. We were intimate both then and after, as I expected we would be again.

"Very well, then. Do you deny that evil exists?"

For the first time that evening, I laughed, surprising even myself with its suddenness. I told him how unexpectedly quick his questions struck to the heart of the matter. He rolled his eyes again and bade me answer his question. I replied that, as he should know, of course I did not.

"And this evil exists actually? It's not just some issue of difference in perspective?" I affirmed my belief in the actual presence of evil.

"Is evil co-equal with good?" I responded first by noting that he had not asked whether I believe in the actual existence of good, to which he said impatiently that he did not have to ask. I indulged him and answered that good was indeed superior.

"Hah! You lovesick old fool, your mind is clouded with drink! Did you not say that *will* was *not* a significant factor in good and evil? I am, *obviously*, making the requisite inferences for you." I waved my hand at him, indicating my permission for his doing so.

"So, evil didn't come from the Pantocrator, and evil is not a byproduct of human will. Whence does it come?" I should make clear that, though I found it easy to anticipate his line of questioning, I did not think myself vastly superior to him in cleverness or wisdom. He wrote exceedingly well, his mind as penetrative as a needle. Instead, my anticipation came from deep familiarity with his ways of thinking, aided by the brute fact that he was now drunker than myself.

I grinned at him. "You can be certain that you will not appreciate this little apology."

He stopped me, and told me that I should not dare speak of the inherent evilness of matter. I replied that, if I should happen to reach that conclusion, I would not be overly surprised. It was an old one we shared long ago.

"But no, not of matter as such. That which you will dislike the most is this: I adopted it following a visit from another eidolon (a wiser one than the Stagiran, by my estimation) in a dream." Luguvalos envied my ability to sink deeply into dream. He badgered me oft upon our waking.

"Creation — I do not think this axiom unorthodox — is naught but a lengthy word spoken by the Pantocrator. All that exists, then, including present company, are mere syllables in this word. But every word, if it is to have meaning as the *logos* of Malkuth does, must be *chosen* among other words, words not spoken. Else, the speech is no different from a brute's monotonous bark, which — because it means all things always, hunger and satiety together — means nothing at all.

"These unspoken words cannot themselves exist, because they would otherwise be words spoken. But equally, these unspoken words cannot *not* exist, for their absence preserves the meaning in choice. They must therefore be held in a state of quasi-existence, a half-life in unreality but not total void. It is from these words that evil rises.

"Natural curiosity is tempered only by moral reasoning. In some, this curiosity is strong and morals weak. Who can say why? It might be said, for some of them, that it is forced upon them by ill circumstance; in others, that it is an act of will. In all of us, I think — excepting the Theanthropos — this curiosity is present to a sufficient degree, that we might experiment in testing the limits of the good through bad action.

"Of course, we are curious after all kinds of knowledge; the Stagiran spoke that '*all men by nature desire to know*.' It is only through experience that we, or most of us, realize that evil is subject to the laws of cause and effect, and that such evil *always* brings about some misfortune, whether obvious or else subtle and thus unrecognized to us.

"I have heard responses to your theory, dearest Luguvalos, from a Muscovite. He was (by his account) a nazareus — though he was largely taught by a *mystes* from Gendania. Yet it is an interesting and little-known quirk of history that your namesake, Luguvalos, famed for the very theory you cribbed, related the importance of will and heroism to that very *mystes*, who in turn instructed the Muscovite!

"However different their systems of belief, your enemies essentially rejected that heroes were self-made works. Rather, they attributed the source of heroes' greatness to providence. 'Not a sparrow shall fall to the ground outside the Pantocrator's will,' and so forth.

"I would not take their tack, Luguvalos. I do believe in the importance of freedom of the will, but I would not give the will primacy, as you do. Do you know the Seven Gifts of the Paraclete?" Luguvalos shook his head.

"I shall name them, inscribed as they are upon my heart: *sapientia*; *intellectus*; *consilium*; *fortitudo*; *cognito*; *pietas*; and *timor Domini*. Now, of these, which do you think the greatest? All are fine gifts — much better, in my mind, than those to which we are entitled — so do not fear a wrong reply."

Luguvalos shrugged his shoulders, rolling his eyes. To my delight, the others were listening closely, especially Judoc.

"Isn't it so very like you, *Stentoriskos*, to wrest control of the disputation and inherit the mantle of Inquisitor? Did I not ask, and did *you* not refuse me, that *I* should be your *maieutikos* this evening? Go on, tell us which gift *you* think is most supreme! I'm certain you're *dying* to relate it."

I smiled, knowing that my intentions had been disclosed: "Ah, I need not have asked you. I am certain you would choose *fortitudo*. Though, if you sat a throne, I'm sure you would find the presence of *timor Domini* in your subjects most agreeable. Can you deny me?" Luguvalos looked as though he might, but did not.

"You enjoy frustrating my rhetorical devices, beloved, and I daresay you are quite skilled at it. All is well, however, since you will instead be blessed with a short monologue, which incorporates all of the replies I could have made to your answer. Is that what you really desired?" I beamed, and he clenched his teeth unsmiling. Judoc rubbed his palms and giggled.

"When I was a young man, I desired to know all high things. Quite literally, in fact; my neck craned upwards constantly." I glanced at Philotimos, who reflexively pawed at his neck. "This practice, of course, led to many awkward injuries and offenses, and I was widely mocked for it.

"Then came my enlistment, when I was chattel in foreign lands. In the regiment, I developed something like fortitude out of necessity. During my first engagement, I was ordered to hold a certain hill no matter the cost. The order, you might say, was backed by a sort of *timor Domini*, but the 'lord' was a vicious man who demanded sacrifice at seeming whim. Did you know that I come from a very small village, even smaller than our present valley? All were related by blood or bond to some degree; I am speaking of three score peasants at most.

"I was alone in holding the hill, save for my *panjagan* and the coming onslaught. The enemy marched in an orderly phalanx, no ranged weaponry of their own. I was fortunate in three regards: first, that the enemy was … immutable enough not to break their rigid formation; second, that I was afforded a sort of bulwark by the dense forest behind me; third, that it was a crystalline day in which the sun was impeded by no means. My weapon, as you know, depended on this for its resupply of shot.

"The enemy closed in and I fired." I reached for my cup.

"In the end, which arrived the day following, I kept the hill. Below me lay towers of the remains from those fallen. … those I had slain. You could not number the dead. At the foothill lay more dead than I had ever known living, by a factor of 16 at least. When I say 'towers,' I mean that, by the first night, the enemy began to climb over their slaughtered comrades in order to reach me. My finger had not left the circuit for two days, constantly firing. Without rest, without food or drink, without shade from sun and with little shield from the chill of night.

"I shall not relate the miasma encircling that place. I cannot relate my joy at the onset rain." I paused to drink.

"I fear that, had someone more romantic related this story," I gestured to Philotimos, "you might have mistaken my survival for fortitude. It was not.

"A creeping sense of unreality came over me on the first day, as though we all were playing some sort of *Kinderspiel*, a mere simulation of war. This veil persisted throughout the engagement, and was not removed until after I had risen from my collapse. After I awoke, a flood of questions and doubts overcame me. Why had I done such a thing? Why had they not simply turned around? Why did not a single one of them steal to the woods and end me from behind? Why had they not answered my volleys with another? Not a single question was asked that did not begin first with 'why?'

"As I was retreating to the castrum, I began to conjure up thin replies to my doubts, trying vainly to reconcile my grief with noble ideals. It was not long before they all were fixed on the word 'honor.' 'It was honor,' I told myself, 'that allowed me to carry the burden of responsibilities owed to my people. It was honor that pressed on my obedience to my *legatus*, who bade me to retain the hill. It was honor for my sake that drove them to reject ranged weaponry, and it was honor for their hetman to adhere to the phalanx without seam. It was honor that drove them to avenge their compatriots, and it was honor that consoled them as they fell. It was honor.'

"That night, I had my first visit from an eidolon. He was a jester with gray hair and, though his eyes betrayed some fool's madness, he was sober and with an unmistakable aura of *gravity*. I did not think to ask him about my doubts. He offered his friendly counsel nevertheless.

"The best thing about his speech was that it offered no cheap consolation. Rather, it rattled me out of my half-constructed, half-inherited dogmata. His large corpus loomed over my sleeping body and said, '*if thou see me down in the battle and bestride me, so; 'tis a point of friendship*.' To my surprise, I laughed. He stepped back, adopted a tone of a winking presbyter, then spoke:

> *What need I be so forward with Him that calls not on me? Well, 'tis no matter. Honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honor set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honor hath no skill in surgery, then? No. What is honor? A word. What is in that word "honor"? What is that "honor"? Air. A trim reckoning. Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it? No. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore, I'll none of it. Honor is a mere scutcheon. And so ends my catechism.*

I wept childlike before him, almost laughing again, but he did not return to comfort me. His stare was fixed on my wineskin, the contents of which had soured in the past days' sun. I dried my eyes and handed him the skin, blinked, and then woke. Both he and my *askos* were vanished. A new, large flagon was by the fire; it held the purest water I have ever tasted."

My hand hovered over my tankard, but I decided to call on the eunuch for water instead. He was listening in and, from a curious sense of pride, informed me that they had just fetched this hydria — he slapped the ceramic — from the mountain stream. I thanked him and turned to my friends.

"I confess, I may have lost the original plot of my oration. We were to speak of beauty, correct?" They nodded their heads, but each of them then did something different. Philotemos, who had crossed his arms over his barrel-like chest, waved his hands at me and silently urged me to continue. Luguvalos was staring at me through wet eyes. Judoc cleared his throat, removed his hands from his lap, slapped his thighs and said, "Well, Sten, I think we all should like to hear the conclusion of your tale."

"I need not keep you overlong, and the length of this story exposes my failure. To return to the original question, I think council is the greatest gift of the Paraclete. This opinion, to be sure, is my own and need not be mistaken for anything definite. But consider the nature of the other gifts, and the effect they bear when they are — like all such gifts — retracted.

"Fear of the Pantocratos — and I mean the proper fear, not a batman's fear — is just and is necessary for our appreciation of the end. Piety too, which might often result from such a just fear, is needed for a clear vision of the world. But fear and piety must be upkept, and this task is no easy one. When one inevitably fails, men feel themselves licensed to all sorts of wickedness. Piety might involve the misinterpretation of received teachings, with its accompanying fear driving the faithful into an irreligious fervor. I might gesture to our recent Inquisition here." All nodded.

"We may now discuss the Paraclete's gifts of the mind: knowledge, understanding, and *sophia*. Knowledge might be said to be the most ambiguous of these gifts, as knowledge is driven by curiosity, and curiosity is neither a force for good or ill. Influential *mystes* have called evil the mere privation of good, and thus there is no such thing as 'knowing' evil things, since such knowledge would be that of nothing. Who am I to disagree?

"Yet I still maintain that one can gain knowledge from the unspoken words, that those words are not *mere* nothing, however insubstantial they might be. There is also likely to be a fixed ceiling to that which we can know, and I would not be surprised if that ceiling is rather low. Certain wise men have fallen into despair

at this ceiling, saying that this limit forces us into solipsism. All manner of deeds can be justified under solipsism.

"Rather shamefully, the gift of understanding is the one I least understand. But, when meditating on the gift one evening, I was fortunate to be granted counsel from another eidolon. Though much of his face was obscured in light, he seemed to be rather plain, built like an ox, and spoke only when he could achieve perfect concision in his sentences. He announced himself as a disciple of the Stagiran. I confessed that I could not discern how understanding was distinct from the other gifts of the mind; I ventured that it might be said to concern itself only with theoretical knowledge, like *sophia*.

"He controverted with me. His arguments were without wasted breath, drawing from abundant sources that appeared to counter his claims, though he was able to meet them all. He was transparent and brilliant in his advances, completely without the cowardice that afflicts so many modern scholars into retreating behind novel ciphers and whispered argot.

"I wish I could relate the full complexity of his moves, but my attention was focused most on following him, and then on prying apart potential faults. His initial move was his most surprising, in which he argued that understanding was not only of theoretical issues, but also concerned matters of practical reason. I wrongly thought this move endangered his position.

"Understanding, you see, is separate from both knowledge and *sophia* in the following way: while the latter gifts allow us to judge aright about created and uncreated matters, respectively, understanding is that which first permits a penetration of the matter. Think on the movement from Yesod to Hod. One might argue that understanding is far more ambiguous than knowledge, since even if properly used, it does not enter the realm of judgments. I have yet to enter this debate.

"We now remain with *sophia*, fortitude, and counsel. Fortitude is indeed a worthy gift, although it contains a romantic lure that might induce good men to needless suffering. Sometimes inaction is indeed the best course, and fortitude will aid you then; other times, a man is called to act, and if he lacks fortitude, he should find himself woefully unequipped.

"But how can the man discern which time is which? These gifts of the mind, if not given practical instruction, are inutile. The gifts of the spirit, if not entrusted to a worthy end, are tools that can be abused.

"Counsel is our sole consolation here, and it is not by accident that the Paraclete is named as such. Yet what of *sophia*, you may ask? '*For*

> *she knoweth and understandeth all things, and shall lead me soberly in my works, and shall preserve me by her power.*
> *So shall my works be acceptable, and I shall govern thy people justly, and shall be worthy of the throne of my patriarch.*

But, I may reply, how is *sophia* received if not by intercession?

> *For who among men is he that can know the counsel of the Pantocratos? or who can think what the will of the Pantocratos is?*
> *For the thoughts of mortal men are fearful, and our counsels uncertain.*
> *For the corruptible body is a load upon the spirit, and the earthly habitation presseth down the mind that museth upon many things.*
> *And hardly do we guess aright at things that are upon earth: and with labour do we find the things that are before us.*
> *But the things that are in heaven, who shall search out?*
> *And who shall know thy thought, except thou give wisdom, and send thy Paraclete from above:*
> *And so the ways of them that are upon earth may be corrected, and men may learn the things that please thee?*

Sophia may indeed be the greatest of good gifts. You might note, however, that this famous song does not praise her but rather counsel.

"Counsel is indeed a gift from on high, though it is something that can be retained always within. Appropriate sobriety in deliberation is not foreclosed to us except by our own hands. And if we should have need to search out the things that are in heaven, we must have patience and fortitude enough to bear awaiting counsel.

"I would like to finish my encomium, overlong as it is, with a reflection on beauty. The beautiful thing is not always a joy, but is a joy *forever*. Counsel might be sought among friends or dreams, or by the timely intercession of the Paraclete. But stability in counsel seems to me only found in works of beauty. Insofar as they are inscribed, they are lasting and ready to aid.

"Beauty — I am paraphrasing here — is the only spiritual thing we love by instinct. Rightly so, as it is beauty that is a constant reminder for us to look upwards, both with neck and by heart.

"It is a unique characteristic of evil things, I have noticed, that they are not beautiful; most of the time, I sympathize with those seekers after evil who appear to recognize this fact, and instead strengthen their attachment to the ugly. By clothing themselves in ugliness, perhaps they think they can steer our recollections of beauty into something perverse. And some of them are indeed successful over some people in some times and places.

"But this false success does not last since, as I mentioned, we love beauty by instinct. It is not enough to fool the eye or the mind, which is easily done. There is no deceiving the sparks of insight we possess innately, the ones we cherish because they are so few. Although some might say that a species of pleasure can be found in bad action, I am confident that true beauty is foreclosed for evil ways. Thus, or so I believe, the seekers after evil are to be pitied most of all, if for no reason other than that they are strangers to beauty."

Luguvalos exhaled sharply through his mouth, though he did raise glass with the others. Cheers went around, then our party gathered around Judoc to inquire after his plans for travel. Not much curiosity was spared for me: my friends knew well both where I was and what I was doing. We remained at Judoc's *Ansitz* for a watch or so, chasing the last scraps of discourse.

As the evening passed and morning advanced, I invited Luguvalos to my cabin to see if he would like to hash out our final disagreements. He accepted and we scaled the mountain, our backs to Mother Shyok.